

Russia: SCO To Openly Challenge U.S.-NATO In South, Central Asia?

By [Global Research](#)

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ST PETERSBURG (Russia): Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani arrived here on Sunday in a bid to seek full membership of the important regional security grouping of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The prime minister is accompanied by Minister for Petroleum and Natural Resources Dr Asim Hussain, Board of Investment's Chairman Saleem Mandviwala and Senator Sughra Imam.

Mr Gilani will address the 10th SCO summit on Monday and seek Pakistan's full membership of the organisation, whose profile and scope have assumed great importance with the presence of China, Russia and other Central Asian states as strong regional partners.

The prime minister is scheduled to hold separate meetings with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who are attending the summit along with other heads of governments and representatives of member and observer states.

Pakistan holds the observer status, along with Mongolia, India and Iran, whereas Sri Lanka and Belarus have been granted the status of dialogue partners and Afghanistan is a special guest.

Ambassador to Russia Khalid Khattak said Pakistan carried regional significance at the SCO forum in the context of security and geographical location that linked South Asia with the energy-rich Central Asia.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao will meet on Monday to discuss expanding their loose Central Asian security alliance to include Pakistan and Iran.

Mr Putin will host Mr Wen in this city almost exactly 10 years after the two countries joined forces with the four ex-Soviet Central Asian republics to form the SCO.

Russia has previously billed the alliance as a regional alternative to Nato and discussed at past meetings the option of including other regional powers in its ranks.

"We are talking about Pakistan and Iran, which have applied for membership," Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters ahead of the talks.

"India is also intent on joining, and Afghanistan has said it wants to be an observer," he said.

But analysts said China preferred to view the group as primarily an economic organisation and noted that Pakistan's membership had already been under discussion for five years.

Russia is upset that the group still receives no formal recognition from Nato.

"Of course, SCO expansion is not an easy process. It requires careful analysis and assessment," Mr Lukashevich conceded.

A senior Russian official said the meeting would note slowing global growth's impact on the price of commodities — the bulk of Russia's exports — and financial market stability.

"You should expect the prime minister to deliver an assessment of economic affairs in the SCO region," Russia's SCO envoy Kirill Barsky told Interfax.

"By the way, it is distinguished by stability, good GDP growth rates and improving investment attraction," he said.

Later, Prime Minister Gilani attended a dinner hosted by Pakistani Ambassador Khalid Khattak. Members of the Pakistani community and Russian businessmen and senior officials were present on the occasion.

In his speech, Mr Gilani said the existing conditions were quite conducive to a partnership between Pakistan and Russia.

He said there was considerable scope to initiate collaboration in various fields, particularly in energy, metallurgy, manufacturing, trade and investments.

The government, on its part, would not only support, but go more than half way to invite and involve Russia's businesses and investors in Pakistan's economic development, Mr Gilani said.

Minister for Petroleum Dr Asim Hussain, Board of Investment Chairman Saleem Mandviwala and Senator Sughra Imam also attended the event.

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